



HEAVY Mental

Craig Nicholls' nationally televised tantrums made him not only one of rock's most unpredictable stars but also a walking advertisement for Ritalin. Now, having found some peace of mind, the Vines' volatile vocalist looks to bury his bratty rep with the highly evolved *Winning Days*.

BY KEN MICALLEF PHOTOGRAPHY BY CLAY PATRICK McBRIDE

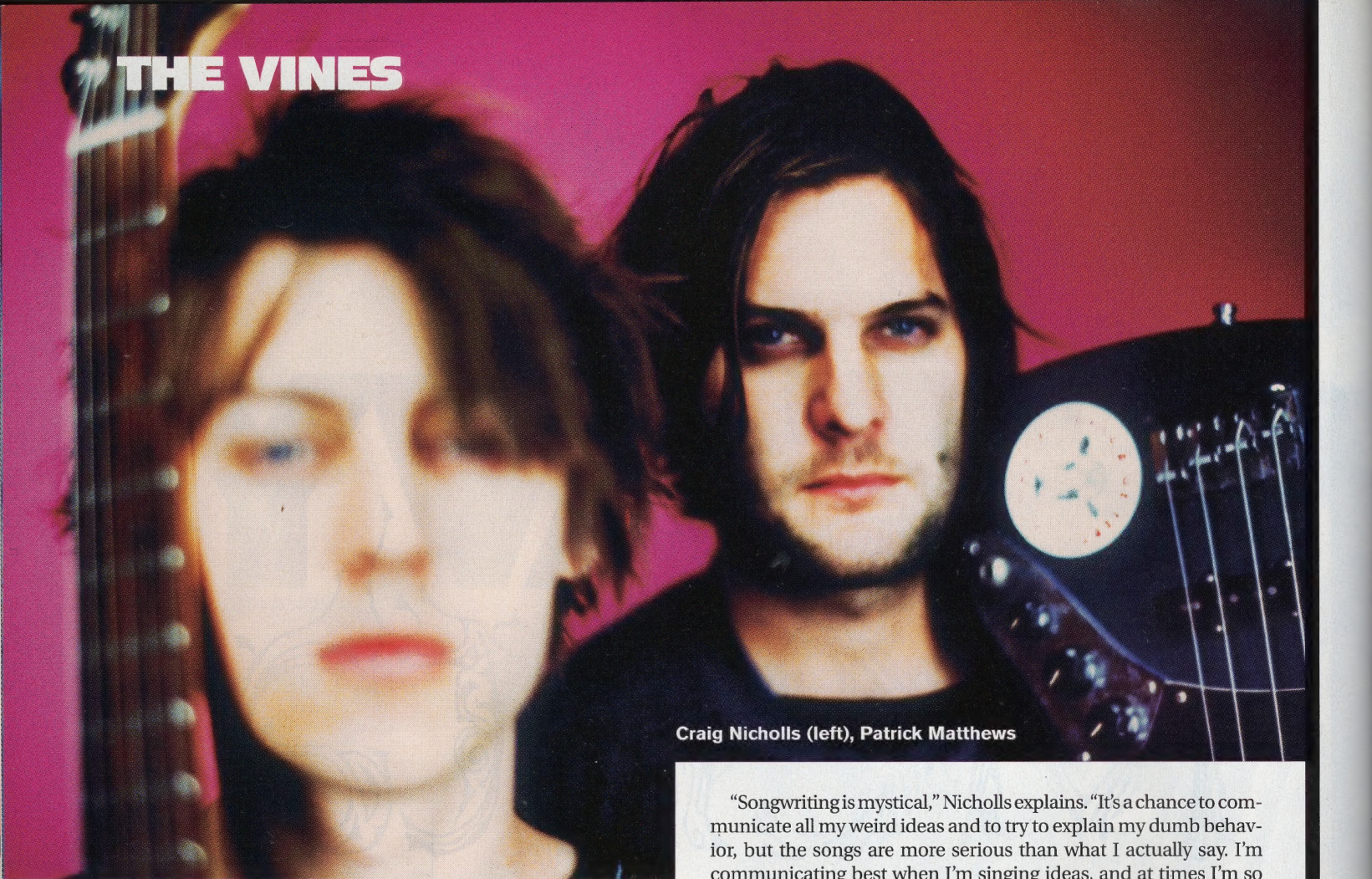


Blond super-babes, Outback muscle-heads, and Fosters-chugging croc-wrestlers—these classic Australian clichés prompt visions of an island nation populated by sunburned alcoholics and Elle McPherson look-alikes, a place where substantial rock must be as rare as a movie actress without breast implants. But this blob-shaped country has had its share of power-music blokes, from '70s wack-jobs the Birthday Party and Radio Birdmen to rock gods AC/DC to frothy weaklings like Powderfinger. But rarely has any country seen the combination of pure talent and slacker temperament embodied by Sydney's the Vines.

The Vines—guitarist/singer Craig Nicholls, bassist/vocalist Patrick Matthews, drummer Hamish Rosser, and guitarist Ryan Griffiths—met while flipping burgers at an after-school job, and within a few short years had sold 1.5 million records and crisscrossed the globe. But the ensuing fame, cash, and insanity caused the eccentric Nicholls to go potty in a series of stunts: he locked himself in a bathroom—often for hours—before shows; kung-fu kicked his bassist on live TV; smashed microwave ovens in middle America; regularly overloaded on junk food and weed; and generally acted like a brain-damaged fool.

"Yeah, they made all that stuff up," scoffs Nicholls, currently in

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Craig Nicholls (left), Patrick Matthews

L.A. "Those stories might be based on one moment, but people have this perception that I'm a little brat who likes to cause trouble wherever I am. But I'm serious about what I do, and I appreciate being able to do what I do."

SONGWRITING PSYCHOSIS

If you want to discuss The Vines' 2002 debut, *Highly Evolved*, or their latest effort, *Winning Days*, with songwriter and vocal savant Nicholls, you'd better be prepared to rock with his roll. He's likely to float off on a tangent, come back, then slip away again before you can decipher his gibberish. Still, he has good company in the babbling-idiot brigade: Syd Barrett, Brian Wilson, and Harry Nilsson, for starters—all brilliant songwriters who couldn't be bothered to communicate on the level of mere mortals.

"When you work with him in the studio, he's nothing like his reputation," says Rob Schnapf, who produced both *Highly Evolved* and *Winning Days*. "What Craig really wants to do is record and make music; that makes him very happy. When he tours, or talks to people he doesn't know, he becomes difficult. But he has a great melodic mind. He has this harmonic thing that just flows naturally out of his mouth."

A fall-down, foaming-at-the-mouth devotee of layered vocal harmonies à la the Beach Boys and the Mamas & the Papas, Nicholls forsakes laptop rigs for the full-on glory of the professional recording studio; for *Winning Days*, it was Bearsville Studios, in upstate New York. With that studio only a short walk from the band's farmhouse, Nicholls was able to concentrate on the music swimming in his head. On one track, "Autumn Shade II," he sings, "Look through me, 'cause I'm a transparent"—the line a clue to his songwriting approach.

“Craig’s quite sane and calm at the moment. But he’s like the rest of us: Sometimes we fight and yell. There’s not much direction in this band in terms of the cerebral cortex. It’s unconscious; it’s rock ‘n’ roll.”

—Patrick Matthews

"Songwriting is mystical," Nicholls explains. "It's a chance to communicate all my weird ideas and to try to explain my dumb behavior, but the songs are more serious than what I actually say. I'm communicating best when I'm singing ideas, and at times I'm so off in that musical world that I feel like I am not even here."

Songwriting puts you into that zoned-out state?

"That state puts me into songwriting," Nicholls corrects. "If you listen to and play a lot of music, that seems to be the universal thing. And to express that state, you need the sounds and the meanings."

As with other inspired but cracked musicians—from Beethoven (deaf at 32) to Chopin (who once imagined himself dead and floating in a lake)—Nicholls sees the music. Before he plays a lick or writes down chords, his music appears as colors or squiggly lines, the debris in the cranium of some mad savant; all normal modes of communication shut down while the muse fills his brain with sounds.

"I get these patterns in my head, especially when we're recording," Nicholls explains. "That's when it's most intense. I start seeing lines—there's always some visual element. My brain does it auto-

matically, and maybe it gives me ideas or helps me figure out the songs. For 'Autumn Shade,' it was peaceful nature and daylight. For 'Amnesia,' it was like flying through deep space."

"Amnesia" and "Autumn Shade II," two of *Winning Days*' most compelling songs, represent the

leap in songwriting skill that has occurred since the Vines' 2002 debut. Though one can still hear the influence of Pavement, Supergrass, Swervedriver, and Blur, Nicholls has found his own voice. Whereas *Highly Evolved*, with songs like "Outtathaway!" and "Get Free," blasted Nirvana-esque intimations over song structures similar to those of the Hives or the Strokes, *Winning Days* is in another league, as it finds Nicholls carving out his own peculiar and provocative sonic world.

BEAUTIFUL MADNESS

Winning Days is an album in every sense of the old-school word. It blasts off hard and harried with the Kinks-ian guitar scrunge

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of "Ride" and the deranged, pick-dragging pummel of "Animal Machine." After that grab-you-by-the-throat introduction, the record goes upcountry. Switching to a stash of '60s guitars, Nicholls and company push harmonies to the fore and explore riveting arrangements that recall the Beatles' *Revolver* as well as XTC's ignored classic, *Black Sea* (with a nod to Nirvana's *Nevermind*). "TV Pro" creeps up with its sleepy, sleazy guitars, and then tumbles over the edge into a dreamscape of cottony vocals and eerily buzz-sawing guitars. Nicholls' incantations veer from crazy child to invisible ghost, as guitars blacken the blue sky like smoke bombs. The effect is spooky yet engaging, like finding a tombstone with your name on it.

"Autumn Shade II" lets it all down, flowing to the center of melancholy and madness, where Nicholls' songwriting magic sends shivers down the spine. With 22 vocal overdubs, the song's melody works the entire scale, top to bottom. Guitars turn into seagulls, vocal harmonies merge with acoustic pianos—it's a beautiful song in a world where beauty is increasingly hard to come by.

"It just sounds great," says Nicholls. "Sometimes with rock music or heavy metal, you become desensitized. It then lacks impact—because you've become used to it—and doesn't seem very heavy or emotional. I think there's room for beauty. Plus, I like ballads. There are a lot of possibilities, and that's the direction we're going to head in."

“People have this perception that I’m a little brat who likes to cause trouble wherever I am. But I’m serious about what I do, and I appreciate being able to do what I do.” —Craig Nicholls

"Winning Days," an acoustic ballad, is a perfect reflection of the Vines' three-month stay at Bearsville, a time spent goofing in the sun and recording in bare feet. In the style of the La's "There She Goes" or The Beatles' "Things We Said Today," "Winning Days" has its roots in Liverpoolian melancholy—even if a ripping guitar solo

briefly disrupts the warm breeze. A few more jangly numbers unfurl until "Amnesia" smacks your skull like a good hit of blotter acid; it evokes dream visions of Pink Floyd performing in your living room.

With harmonies stacked to the sky and guitars soaring over Mellotron and Moog synthesizers, the song elevates your senses like a drifting hot air balloon on a windy summer day. The eardrum-shredding "Fuck the World" closes the set with a middle finger, but the album's beauty marks will leave you enamored of the Vines' songwriting power.

"We knew we had a bunch of different kinds of songs, but we didn't really know how they'd all fit," Nicholls says. "We hoped that, like with the first album, they'd fit, but you don't know until you are done. This album is different; it takes you on a trip."

FRETBOARD FRENZIES

What makes the trip so memorable, beyond Nicholls' ethereal vocal layer cake and the band's attention to detail, are guitar solos, which enter the songs as if pointing to some mystery code. Whereas many of his contemporaries refuse, possibly out of a false sense of hipness,

to play solos, Nicholls executes torrid leads that scorch and howl.

"A solo is a simple thing that really works," Nicholls explains. "We try to put them in context; we don't stick a 10-minute solo in the song just 'cause I can play it. I actually have melodies in my head that I play on the guitar which are completely different from a song's melody. It is about variation, and each variation should complement the next."

Just as they did on *Highly Evolved*, Nicholls and Griffiths often changed guitars within songs, for ultimate impact.

"We'll record a part for the beginning or add a feedback track towards the end—it's the icing on the cake," says Nicholls. "The details make the finished product. If you can pay attention, simple things sound the best, but you can combine them in many ways. We didn't have any rules."

For the *Winning Days* sessions, Nicholls—who relies mostly on a Fender Strat and a Marshall half-stack for live shows—entered the playground of Rob Schnapf's "guitar arsenal," where, using the producer's famed set of tools, the guitarist realized the music of his mind.



"Craig's solos work because they're based on melodies, not on noodling," Schnapf explains. "He's not just scale-chasing; his solos are based around a line. That's why the guitars and the vocals can cross over one another, merge, or form lines of melodic counterpoint."

"Craig's solos had a starting place," continues Schnapf, "and then it came down to how we would bend and twist them from there."

Far-out guitar moments on *Winning Days* are too many to count, from the country-punk solos on "Ride" and "Animal Machine" to the bleeding-fingers-on-ice screech of "Fuck the World." Still, there are band favorites.

"Amnesia" was the most bizarre, in its extended outro section," says Matthews. "It's like a guitar solo, but it isn't really a guitar solo—just these bizarre noises that Craig learned how to get from the guitar amp by playing it live a lot. To get it recorded took a lot of fiddling around with feedback and shaking of the guitar's neck. It's just notes bowing and leaping. The start of that song has the most in-depth guitar and vocals on the album, and some of the most precise moments."

UNCONSCIOUS FOR ROCK 'N' ROLL

Whether Nicholls can compose himself long enough to make it through the inevitable


Winning Days tour is anybody's guess, but Matthews, once the songwriter's confessed keeper, has faith.

Says Matthews: "That was a long time ago; I haven't had to look after Craig for a long time. He's quite sane and calm at the moment. But he's like the rest of us: Sometimes we fight and yell, and occasionally we have secret, whispered conferences. There's not much direction in this band in terms of the cerebral cortex. It's unconscious; it's rock 'n' roll."

Nicholls is already onto the Vines' next record, thinking about deeper harmonies and greater experimentation. He may sing,

"The winning days are gone," but he certainly knows better. "We're going to spend a long time on the next one," he muses. "I always wanted to do harmonies, the whole 'row, row, row your boat' idea. I would like to make even more layered recordings. I'm looking forward to doing some deep experimentation but with a lot of preparation. I'll have the songs ready, and then I'd like to do 10-part harmonies."

Craig, are you seeing colors yet?

"I imagine the sound we'll make in the future as very clean and airy and spacey, and kind of lazy and hyperactive. It will be elastic and jump around from here to there." 

CRAIG'S LIST

Nicholls' Go-to Gear for *Winning Days*

Solidbody

'64 Fender Jazzmaster
'64 Fender Telecaster
'53 Gibson Les Paul
'63 Gibson SG Junior
'63 Guild S200

Electric Hollowbody

'63 Epiphone Riviera 12-string
'63 Gibson ES 330
'74 Guild Starfire IV
TTR Design custom

Acoustics

'63 Epiphone Texan
'57 Gibson J50

Amps

Marshall Super Lead (formerly owned by the Stooges)
Sound City 50W head
'49 Fender Pro
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Guitar one MAY 2004

FEATURES

74 GUITAR SCHOOL George Benson

In the mainstream media, George Benson is simply a guitarist who sings the oft-heard soul-pop numbers "This Masquerade" and "On Broadway." But to jazzers and other serious players, Benson is an absolute monster, one of the baddest dudes to ever wield an archtop. Check out his private lesson with West Coast Editor Dale Turner.

80 BREAKTHROUGH Blindside

These Swedish rockers didn't need a gimmick or a peculiar fashion sense to rise above the competition. Instead, they spent a lot of time polishing their unique vision—and their guitar work—on the international post-hardcore scene. *By Robert Cherry*

84 COVER STORY Grunge: Ten Years After

It's been 10 years since Kurt Cobain's suicide solution, an important anniversary, we think, and one that inspires a look back at the incredible impact the Seattle scene had on today's rock 'n' roll. Includes a rare interview with Kurt Cobain and excerpts from classic conversations with Stone Gossard, Jerry Cantrell, and Kim Thayil. Plus! The 25 Greatest Grunge Albums of All Time.

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They met each other flipping burgers at a Sydney fast-food joint. Then, incredibly, sparked by singer/guitarist Craig Nicholls' mercurial slacker persona, they met with fame a few short years later. The Vines' new album, *Winning Days*, goes a long way in validating that fame. *By Ken Micallef*

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